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Approaches, methods and techniques[1] in second language teaching: From past to present

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ABSTRACT

Taking the ancestral human drive to learn other languages as a starting point, this article reviews the various trends that language teaching has gone through from classical times to our period. Special emphasis is given to the current concern for teaching and learning languages in order to communicate, a tendency systematized within the methodological framework known as the *Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*. To end with, the authors venture into some predictions about the future prospects of language teaching, an activity that, in their opinion, will be mediated by the multilingual needs and technological breakthroughs that our world is beginning to experience today.

KEY WORDS: Approach, method, technique, second language teaching and learning, communication, interaction, competence.

1. THE PAST

Learning and teaching foreign languages has been a social quest as old, we could say, as speaking those languages. Whenever two different languages have come into contact for one reason or another, there have always been people willing and eager to learn and speak the unknown one. In every time and culture, humans have always craved communication with others. This need has impelled them to study those languages which were an obstacle to their becoming acquainted with other cultures and other peoples. We should not then be surprised by the

1 According to E. Anthony 1963, (cited in J. Richards and T.S. Rodgers, 1986):

"*Approach* refers to theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as the source of practices and principles in language teaching" (op. cit.: 16).

"*Method* is the level at which theory is put into practice and at which choices are made about the particular skills to be taught, the content to be taught, and the order in which the content will be presented" (op. cit.: 15).

"*Technique* is the level at which classroom procedures are described. Techniques must be consistent with a method and therefore in harmony with an approach as well" (op. cit.: 15).

reality that the study and knowledge of foreign languages were fundamental in the curricula of youngsters in ancient India, Greece or Rome. This historical detail only reveals a fact which was common and necessary those days.

Latin was the *lingua franca* in Europe under Roman rule, and during the Middle Ages until the Renaissance. It was, therefore, studied and learnt by the upper classes throughout our continent. Unfortunately, the fall of the Roman Empire, the progressive loss of the Church's political influence and above all, the birth of new nations and the growth of local languages were all major factors in the eventual decline of Latin as the international language. Little by little, this language ceased to exist as a *living* and spoken language and was reduced to a mere instrument of written culture.

Nevertheless, Latin continued to be a basic pillar in the education of young Europeans from the 15th to the 19th centuries. The fact that it was no longer a spoken but only a written language, favoured the design of teaching methods that relied mostly on the study and learning of complicated grammar rules and lengthy lists of words. The translation of classical texts from Latin into the different European languages became common practice among students. When diplomatic, economic and social links between countries in Europe increased, the need to learn the different languages also increased. In the 18th century, modern languages began to be taught and learned extensively mainly because of incipient industrialization and the unceasing growth of business relations and communications. The need to learn modern languages was finally established as a social goal, but how to achieve that goal now became a problem not recognized at the time. Unfortunately, teaching methods in general were anchored in tradition. The same recipes had been used and applied for centuries, so Latin became again the target language for teachers of other languages and provided the method. No matter what language they taught (German, French or English), textbooks contained the same kind of grammar descriptions (rules), lists of vocabulary and the translation of selected literary texts in just the same fashion as Latin had been and was still taught. The oral/aural aspects of those languages were neglected and quite often disdained:

> No nos detendremos ahora en el árduo tratado de la pronunciación inglesa, por cuanto son sus reglas tan varias y tan sujetas á escepciones, que hasta los mismos ingleses andan discordes en algunos puntos; y tanto, que en algunos casos tienen que consultar los diccionarios de la pronunciación inglesa por Walker ó Sheridan. (Bergues de las Casas, A. 1864:2).

On the other hand, the sentences offered as examples were completely artificial and did not have the living touch of daily speech. The outcome was tedious sets of grammar exercises unconnected with reality and which did not lead to improving the student's ability to communicate in real-life, everyday situations. A student could spend years studying English or any other foreign language without actually ever hearing anybody speaking the language. This situation

went on throughout the 18th century until the first half of this century and, no doubt, continues to exist in the teaching caverns of some teachers.

However, during the 19th century, there were some timid attempts to encourage the oral proficiency in foreign languages and some alternative methods were created. Based on innovative theoretical approaches, they were more active and exciting for both teachers and students. For example, research into how children learn their mother tongue produced findings which some authors applied to their second-language methods (C. Marcel, 1793-1896. T. Prendergast, 1806-1886. F. Gouin, 1831-1896). Their research originated the first serious and profound studies by H. Sweet and W. Viëtor which would be the seeds of a major reform that would transform the methods and techniques of teaching modern languages, finally free from the *unhealthy* influence of the traditional methods used to teach Latin. The Direct Method, extensively used in the Berlitz Schools, spread a much needed methodological change that considered modern languages mainly as instruments of oral communication.

The different approaches, methods and techniques that have succeeded during the past decades have been supported by important breakthroughs in linguistics and psychology, and have also been influenced by work in sociology and anthropology. Audio-visual techniques, so widely used in the fifties and sixties, were assisted by the ruling linguistic paradigm of the day: Structuralism, according to which, languages consist of systems of structurally related elements. Each structure is formed by substructures and is in itself part of a superstructure (phonemes-morphemes-words-phrases-sentences). When this linguistic model was applied to the learning of modern languages, sets of linguistic formulas called *patterns* were devised in order to facilitate the learning and use of new structures.

On the other hand, the then leading psychological paradigm, Behaviorism, contributed with the psychological mechanisms necessary to improve the effective learning of these structures. For the behaviorist, learning was a matter of creating habits; therefore, the imitation, memorization and repetition of given models was the best way to ensure an efficient and quick learning of any language. Techniques like the use of exercises called *drills* (constant repetition of a given pattern with slight changes in its constituent elements) became a common practice. New technologies were created or adopted to implement these practices (language laboratories, slide projectors, tape recorders, etc) and real progress was experienced by students who finally were able to learn and use words, phrases and sentences in the second language with acceptable command and accent.

One of the main achievements of Structuralism was the clear division made between linguistic components (Phonetics, Grammar and Vocabulary) and language skills (Understanding, Speaking, Reading and Writing). This division, still used in most modern textbooks, allowed highly organized and productive teaching with the practice of these elements done individually or in various combinations.

Time has passed and the Structuralist method has been superseded by new approaches and techniques but everybody should concede that it was the first really effective way of learning a second language. It proved efficient and practical although the excessive amount of time devoted to repetition and imitation often caused unbearable boredom in the long-term student. *Drills kill* was a popular saying in those days. This method, which obtained from the students an impressive amount of learning in the first months, brought learners eventually to a discouraging standstill, due mainly to a patent lack of imaginative alternatives and a failure to recognize the need to progress to freer excercises.

By the sixties, the Behaviorist school in psychology and the structuralist orientation in linguistics were replaced by two new schools of thought. In psychology the cognitive theories of learning emphasized the active role of the mind in acquiring new knowledge. In linguistics, Chomsky (1956) published *Syntactic Structures*, where he defended generative-transformational grammar, a theory of linguistics focused on syntax rather than on language as sound. He also introduced a dichotomy that would have some future effects: Chomsky thought of an ideal native speaker who possessed *competence* —knowledge of the system of the language, that is, rules of grammar, vocabulary and the way the linguistic elements are combined to form acceptable sentences— and who put such knowledge into practice, into *performance*. Both schools of thought saw language as an internal, rule-governed behaviour. The speaker's knowledge was based on a finite set of rules by means of which an infinite variety of sentences can be generated and understood.

Despite the fact that teachers were looking for a theory that could replace audiolingualism, these new ideas did not have a definite effect on language teaching, as generativists were not interested in pedagogy *per se*. On the other hand, new social needs demanded new ways of learning languages. Faster and better means of transport, the increase of tourism or the development of mass media technologies caused the interdependence of peoples and countries. New multinational bodies like the European Community made the learning of languages essential for advancement and personal success. Anybody who wished to keep up with his/her present, professional career or just enjoy his/her holidays could not afford not to know a foreign language. New methods and techniques based on a communicative approach of the language were put into practice. The social purpose of learning a language took over from mere academic interest. The clues for a communicative competence were taken as points of reference for the development of a new approach in the learning of foreign languages.

In the early 1970s, the Council of Europe launched the *Threshold Level* for modern language teaching. This was an ambitious plan which aimed at creating a catalogue of basic communicative patterns, called *functions and notions* and which could be applied to the teaching and learning of most European languages. The idea was to create a pan-European method which made the learning of any language easier, especially from a communicative perspective.

Prominent scholars[2] were commissioned by the Council of Europe to design the methods and techniques necessary to achieve this objective. The result was the Functional-Notional method which has been very popular since the middle seventies. This was the first second-language method to be fully backed and supported by textbook writers, publishers and even governments that adapted their national curricula to its guidelines. Although it was first labelled as the Functional-Notional method, its rather eclectic layout plus the influence of research carried out in other fields such as linguistics, sociolinguistics or philosophy of language broadened its scope, and soon new methods and techniques were developed. Nowadays they are referred to as the Communicative Approach.

2. THE PRESENT

Communicative teaching and learning is the core of second language study today. Few books are published now with a structuralist or traditional content. 'Communication' and 'interaction' are magic words frequently included in book titles and catalogues. These words sell and are sought after. People everywhere are eager to learn languages. They demand them for their business, careers or just for pleasure, but above all, they want to learn languages to open new possibilities of communication with other peoples and different cultures. Learning languages is no longer an academic pastime but an urgent need in the modern world.

To complete this picture, a new linguistic and psychological paradigm reigns over the academic world. Pragmatics and Cognitive Psychology dominate the scene. Recent educational reforms in Spain consider communication as the most desirable target in second-language learning and teachers should comply with these requirements and goals although it means for them further training and abandoning traditional syllabuses. Communication has become law in Spain now!

Pragmatics offers theoretical support by means of the well-known Speech Act theory (Searle, Austin), Discourse Analysis (Sinclair, Coulthard and the Birmingham School) and the functional approach to grammar by Halliday and others. Pragmatics should be described as a multidisciplinary approach (including Linguistics, Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, Philosophy and in general all those sciences that consider human activity as the axis of their pursuits). It studies what has been commonly described as *language in action.*

What man does with language, how he interacts with the others or what aspects modify or influence the normal progression of any conversational exchange are issues of the utmost importance for pragmaticians. The relation between this language theory and the Communicative Approach is obvious and it is inevitable

2 Van Ek, Alexander (1980), Wilkins (1976), Widdowson (1978), etc.

for them to complement each other. Nonetheless, the ways of interpreting these tasks are so numerous that the relatively small amount of research has not yet been able to cope with these ambitious objectives. Some rely on the psychological side, others prefer a more linguistic or grammatical perspective and still others seek a sociological stand, but the creation and development of a pragmatic curriculum applied to second-language learning and teaching is still very far from being completed and utopian. A few researches in this guise have, however, been completed. Blum Kulka and Olshtain (1986) have shown that non-native speakers (NNS) tend to make mistakes because they use longer utterances than native speakers (NS). Pica (1987), Gasser (1990) or Klein (1990) foresee the advantages of using repetition and redundancy in speech as learning mechanisms of the utmost importance[3].

In the following pages we attempt a summary of the main approaches and techniques now currently used in second-language teaching. In spite of their differences and varieties, practically all of them regard the Communicative creed as the beginning and end of their methodological pursuits.

As was suggested above, the principle underlying a communicative approach is the idea that language learning is learning to communicate. In this sense, communicative competence is the desired goal. This concept develops as a reaction against Chomsky's theory of transformational-generative grammar. His idea of grammar[4] has no place for aspects such as the appropriateness of the performance or the context in which we use language. The idea that language is something *other* than rules and form is one of the linguistic reactions developed within Pragmatics. From that moment onwards, competence refers not only to the knowledge of these parameters but also to the ability to *use* that knowledge, because "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (Hymes 1979: 15). As a result of this work, some linguists and researchers began to refer to *communicative competence* as a notion that was different from *grammatical* or *linguistic competence*. This new conception of competence comprises all four skills —listening, speaking, reading and writing— and it consists basically of four major components: *grammatical competence* includes knowledge of vocabulary, rules of pronunciation and spelling, word-formation and sentence structure, that is, aspects related to the degree to which the language user has mastered the linguistic code; *sociolinguistic competence* refers to the appropriate use of grammatical forms in different contexts in order to convey specific communicative functions; *discourse competence* addresses the ability to combine ideas to achieve cohesion in form and coherence in thought; and *strategic competence* involves the use of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies to produce communication or to compensate for breakdowns in it. This

3 See Mitchell, R and Brumfit, C. 1991.

4 Nevertheless, Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar (UV) has stimulated the interest of many researchers who feel attracted by the possibilities this theory can offer to explain apparently unrelated phenomena or differences between L1 and L2 acquisition (Mitchell, R. & Brumfit, C. 1991).

new, more complete way of viewing competence was to turn language-teaching on its head: if until that moment linguistic competence had been the goal of our teaching programs, it had become necessary to account for communicative competence (insisting on the meaningful content of the classroom activities rather than on overt language-learning).

This new goal in language teaching has already had some effects in the classroom, as it has in the field of methodology where, to our minds, the communicative approach to language teaching has been innovating. As Stern holds, "Teachers may have been familiar with communicative activities for many years; but the idea of making use of them systematically and of developing a distinct syllabus of such activities is certainly not widely known and probably even less widely applied" (1992: 176).

Advocates of this approach aim at *authenticity*, either of materials (which turn out to be authentic or simulating authenticity), of tasks (students are expected to fulfil activities that they might need in the *real world*, or that lead to the development of skills relevant to these tasks), or of classroom communication (classroom management, student-teacher interaction, instructions, metalanguage). Therefore the use of activities that encourage student participation in natural environments and personal involvement —group and pair-work, simulation, role-plays, drama, etc— becomes paramount. Among the principles of a communicative activity syllabus we can mention: *information transfer*, focused on the ability to understand and convey information content, like in situations such as gathering information from a timetable, relating a table or map to a text, or extracting information from a diagram; *information gap*, aimed at creating conditions which closely parallel real-life situations where the reaction of a speech partner is never absolutely predictable; the *jigsaw principle*: separate bits of information are given to several groups, who will communicate with each other, the result of this co-operation leading to the making-up of a story or solving a murder mystery; and *problem-solving*: problems, riddles or puzzles which provoke students' curiosity; in order to find the solution, pairs, groups, or the class as a whole are asked to think and talk about the problem.

Since one of the teacher's objectives is the development of the four communicative skills we mentioned before, this framework makes use of multidimensionality, an idea which is applied in several ways. They use different types of texts —written, spoken, pictorial— and hence different skills are simultaneosly employed, as the development of one skill aids in the development of others. There is also a variety of routes that can be taken towards the completion of the tasks by means of a combination of skills. By the same token, there exists the possibility of multiple responses, solutions, or interpretations by learners, this being a good opportunity for the creative use of the language in order to express individual meaning.

Most learning activities should be contextualized in realistic interactive situations involving different speakers. Any device exploited to obtain these objectives is acceptable and its use should be encouraged. There are some pragmatic aspects which deserve attention and are currently being studied. For example, it has been demonstrated that native speakers (NS) change the quality of their discourse when they communicate with non-native speakers (NNS), no matter how proficient the latter are. They consciously or unconsciously reformulate their utterances and even their pronunciation and voice pitch as if they were aware that their listeners may fail to grasp their message fully. This phenomenon disappears when the other speaker is a native (NS).

The role of the teacher has also changed with regard to previous methods where he/she had total control over all the activities and guided the learning course of his/her students. With the Communicative Approach, the central role has shifted from the teacher to the student who takes a more active and decisive part in the teaching process. The teacher must be able to know and understand his/her student's language needs and interests and be willing to fulfil them.

Language teaching, like many other fields of knowledge, has also benefited from the applications of the most recent technological developments. The use of computers, for example, provides an innovative multidimensionality to classroom activities. Computers have been used in the humanities for some years, but only in the last few years has it been possible to access sufficient hardware and software and to incorporate computerised research methods into language teaching. In the late seventies a language learning program was used in the United States, by means of which the teacher could input and edit exercises done by students. This technique has also been used in language testing, and still in America, the PLATO system, developed at the University of Illinois, allows a tutor to issue instructions for constructing lessons, and has a simple method of judging or marking the results.

One of the most controversial issues in second-language teaching today, partly as a result of the interest in the development of communicative competence, is a question that could be stated as *fluency vs. accuracy*. In other words, should our teaching be aimed at developing fluency in the use of the second language at the expense of accuracy, lexical choice, structure formation and the rest, or should we rather insist on preserving formal correctness and place less emphasis on fluency?

Not all communicatively oriented approaches agree on the role of grammar in the classroom. One of the outstanding theories focused on the development of fluency is the so-called *Natural Approach*, a modern adaptation of the Direct Method, proposed by the psychologists S. Krashen and T. Terrell around the early eighties. Their theory is built upon five major hypotheses: the *Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis* claims that there are two distinctive ways of

developing competence in a second or foreign language: *acquisition*, the natural and subsconcious way, similar to first-language development in children, and *learning*, which refers to a process in which rules about a language are consciously or deliberately learnt. Formal teaching is necessary in order for learning to occur, but it does not help acquisition, they claim. The *Natural Order Hypothesis* states that grammatical structures are acquired —not necessarily learned— in a predictable order: some structures tend to be acquired early, whereas others tend to be acquired later. We cannot say that the order of acquisition for second language is exactly the same as that for first language, but there are some clear similarities. The *Input Hyphothesis* claims that we acquire —not learn— language by understanding input that is a little beyond our current level of acquired competence. In this sense, listening comprehension and reading become fundamental activities in a language program. The ability to speak *emerges* naturally after the acquirer has built up competence through comprehending input that she/he is able to understand through context and extra-linguistic information. According to this hypothesis, the target language is not only the subject of analysis, but basically the medium through which communication is achieved. The *Monitor Hypothesis* holds that the only function of conscious learning is to act as a monitor or editor that checks and repairs the output of the acquired system. This does not mean that grammar is absolutely rejected: there is a place for grammatical explanation and a stress on grammatical accuracy, but it is not in the classroom. Grammatical accuracy develops without the benefit of classroom time, communicative ability does not, that being the reason why it is necessary to insist on the development of communicative ability in the classroom. Finally, the *Affective Filter Hypothesis* sees the learner's emotional state or attitude as an adjustable filter that passes, impedes or blocks input necessary to acquisition. Acquirers with a low affective filter receive more input, interact with confidence, and are more receptive to the input they receive, whereas anxious acquirers have a high affective filter —fear, embarrassment— which prevents acquisition from taking place. In order to lower the affective filter of learners, the Natural Approach calls for the creation of a social community in the classroom for which the target language is the medium of social exchange.

We must not forget, however, that although communicative activities may be an essential component of a language curriculum, there is also a place for an analytic language syllabus. At any given time, the emphasis may shift from one component to the other, but both are needed, complementing each other and contributing to develop second-language proficiency. For that reason we can speak of a much more flexible and eclectic version of the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching (why not seek the development of both fluency and accuracy?), which admits that grammar is a construct in itself, although it belongs to the overall construct we call communicative competence. Communicating as far as possible, and with all available resources, is our goal. But focus on meaning should not imply a complete abandonment of form. If we decide that they serve a useful role in maintaining form, drills should be welcome as a way of reinforcing the previous communicative activities. If this is the case, there are

some principles that can turn a drill into a communicative type of exercise, without neglecting our stress on form.

3. THE FUTURE

It has always been claimed that the best way to learn a second language is to live in the country or countries where the language is spoken. Obviously, exposing learners to the reality of language through contact with native speakers has been widely recognized as necessary for an advanced command of a second language. That is the reason why, in our opinion, the lines that foreign-language teachers should follow lie precisely in being aware of the fact that communication is not a late phase that follows language instruction, but is an integral part of instruction from the beginning. A communicative component in the foreign language curriculum opens channels of communication to the target community at a personal level of contact, and provides life experiences mediated through the second language, a fact to be borne in mind at a time when we are beginning to think in terms of a multilingual community of nations.

The future is likely to offer the students of other languages highly sophisticated and powerful techniques that will make it possible to recreate a *virtual reality*. Classrooms, complete with interactive systems (computers, videos, electronic information, laserdiscs, satellite televisison, etc) will imitate real communicative settings. Advanced technologies will facilitate self-access centres, learner autonomy or distance learners. Traditional classes involving teacher-student interaction will be strongly supported and, somehow, controlled by technological devices which both students and teachers will have to master. Easy and cheap travel will allow students to practise, *in situ*, what they have learnt in class. Communication is and will be the final goal and, no doubt, tomorrow's citizens will command several languages. The world, then, might become smaller and better, free from social prejudices and cultural ignorance.

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